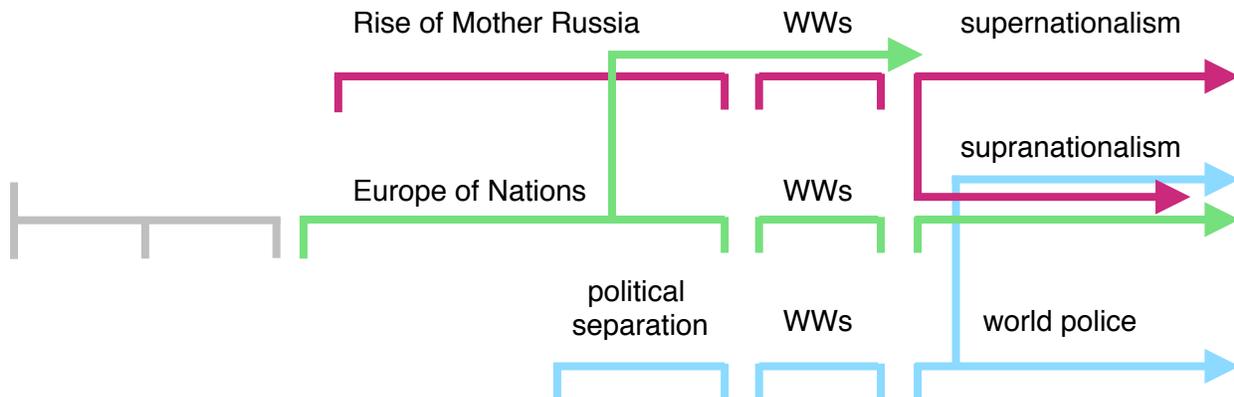


## **VII. The Greco-Roman Background**

### A. Completing the Big Picture

1. Everything we have learned about the history of the modern interconnected history of Europe, Russia, and America is rooted in a background story of Greece and Rome.
2. To capture this reality, let's add one more segment to our timeline:



### B. Athens: Monarchy and Aristocracy

1. Athens started with a simple model common to all ancient cultures. It had what is usually called a “monarchy,” i.e. the “rule of one.”
2. At the top was a king, who ruled for life, but he belonged to the most powerful family that had founded the city, which was allied to a large group of other families that referred to themselves as the “aristos” (the best), and without which neither the main family nor the king could maintain themselves in power.
3. This arrangement highlights an important point that holds true through all of history: there really is no such thing as monarchy. All monarchies are, in fact, forms of aristocracy, with a large ruling group surrounding a single figure, who may have a lot of power (depending on how charismatic he is) or may rely almost entirely on those around him (especially in a hereditary, and/or bureaucratic monarchy).

### C. The Problem of Debt Slavery

1. Like other ancient cultures, one basic idea continued to guide people in the making of governments: one group must rule the others. The “aristos” were the accepted rulers in all such societies, but the harsh realities of life sometimes led the commoners to rebel against their rule.
2. In times of drought, Athens's commoners often starved. If they wanted to survive they had to turn to the aristocratic land-owners for help. To obtain loans of food or supplies,

the commoners had to agree that if they could not repay their debt they would lose their property and become slaves.

3. When this way of organizing society became intolerable to too many commoners, they rebelled.
4. In one such episode, the aristocracy triumphed in a civil war and appointed an “archon” to prevent civil unrest. His name was Draco, and his especially harsh laws became notorious through the ages. The modern English word “draconian” is derived from his name and is used to denote rules that are very severe.

#### D. The First Advance: Solon

1. In 594, with another round of civil conflict at its peak, the two sides agreed to submit their dispute to a respected archon named Solon.
2. Solon was given absolute power to create new laws, and the people further agreed to follow his laws for ten years thereafter.
3. Solon attempted to force the Athenians to change their way of thinking to better balance the desperate needs of the commoners and the power and property of the aristocrats.
  - a) First, Solon *emancipated* the debt slaves, and returned their property to them.
  - b) Second, he *abolished* the institution of debt slavery. From that point on, it would be illegal to make any contract that would result in slavery.
  - c) However, Solon refused to *redistribute* property from the aristocrats to the commoners, which would relieve their plight in times of drought.
4. As positive as these measures were, they could not solve the recurring problem of famines under conditions of subsistence agriculture. Further violence was almost certainly inevitable.

#### E. The Rule of a “Tyrannos”

1. Solon's laws were temporarily accepted by the Athenians. However, the commoners were not satisfied because Solon has not given them more land. This meant they would eventually have to turn to the lords for help again. The commoners did not want to be dependent in this way.
2. For their part, the lords resented the loss of slaves and property.
3. The commoners chose a respected military hero and nobleman named Peisistratus to champion their cause. His willingness to support the commoners earned him both the admiration of the commoners and the hatred of his fellow aristocrats.
4. With the help of the commoners, Peisistratus became the “tyrannos” of Athens after another round of violence. (The difference between a “tyrannos” and an “archon” was simply that an archon was chosen by the aristocracy. A tyrannos is someone who is chosen by the common people.)
5. By taking land from the aristocrats and giving it to the commoners, Peisistratus made himself very popular.

## F. The Second Advance: Cleisthenes and the Birth of Democracy (c.508 BC)

1. The aristocracy regained control of Athens, and there was a new contest for leadership. If the people continued to fight, Athens would eventually be conquered by some other city-state.
2. **C.508 BC**, an aristocrat named Cleisthenes was able to convince the aristocracy to accept a new idea to share power with the commoners.
  - a) To break up the power of the aristocracy, Cleisthenes allowed all commoners to participate in a new assembly that was made responsible for all the laws of Athens.
  - b) Also, the aristocrats no longer had any special privileges. All important officials were chosen by elections, and all matters were decided by a majority vote in the assembly.
  - c) Now every citizen could participate in the government, and the majority would rule. (This system, *democracy*, the rule of the people, gets its name from the Greek words “demos”—people, and “kratia”—the rule of.)

## G. Sparta: Ancient Communism

1. Sparta is the second most important city-state in Greek history because of its famous warriors.
2. Sparta was located on the Peloponnese (the peninsula that sticks out from mainland Greece).
3. Early in their history, the conquering aristocracy had belonged to two ruling tribes who chose to cooperate and have one king from each tribe at the same time.
4. The main responsibility of the king was to lead Sparta in times of war. (One king stayed at home, while the other went to war.) Both kings had to agree before Sparta would officially go to war.
5. This could be called a “duarchy,” but like most kinds of kingship, it was really an aristocracy. The two Spartan kings were monitored by five officials known as “ephors,” who could arrest a king, if he broke the law.
6. The “separation of powers” in Sparta was similar to the aristocracy of Athens, but the reason why America’s founding fathers did not like the Spartan mode was that *even the aristocracy did not have the “right to life” in Sparta!*
7. Every Spartan belonged to the government.
  - a) At age seven, they were taken from their families and lived in a public school until they were twenty.
  - b) Their training became gradually more intense, until the final two years, when the young men were taught the art of war and they prepared to join the army.
  - c) At age 20, a Spartan male “graduated.” He then joined a platoon of Spartan soldiers, with whom he would spend most of his life with for the next ten years.
  - d) Only when a Spartan soldier had served in the military for ten years, he earned the right to join the government, and participate in the making of laws for Sparta.
  - e) Spartan girls were also educated by the government, however they did not train to become soldiers. Spartan women had one role only: to manage the land of their

families. The choice of a husband was made by a woman's father, or, if the father was dead, by the government. They too lived in service to the whole community.

8. Any system of government in which the individual is controlled by the government so completely in the name of the “common good,” is known as “communism.” (It is not necessary to have a philosophy like Marxism or Leninism to make it so.)

#### H. Greece Stands Together

1. Soon after the birth of democracy in Athens, Greece was attacked by the massive Persian Empire the ancient Greco-Persian War.
2. In order to win this war, the Greeks had to work together. The most famous episode of this cooperation was the sacrifice of king Leonidas and his famous 300 Spartans warriors who delayed the Persian invasion at a mountain pass called Thermopylae. This allowed the rest of the Greeks to better prepare to coordinate their resistance to the Persian onslaught, and positioned Athens to lead the Greeks in a largely naval victory at the later Battle of Salamis.

#### I. Greece Falls Apart

1. In order to continue attacking Persia after the invasion, Athens formed an alliance called the Delian League. Sparta, however, was not invited to participate and it formed its own competing Peloponnesian League.
2. The rivalry between the two city-states sparked the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), in which Sparta defeated Athens, but all of Greece exhausted itself and became more susceptible to conquest from an outside power.
3. Sparta itself was only temporarily in charge. Soon Greece was conquered by neighboring Macedonia, under Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander “the Great.”
4. Although Alexander commanded the Greeks on a fantastic invasion of the Persian Empire, which was briefly successful, he soon died, and the Greeks were not numerous enough to maintain such an empire. Soon they would collide with an even greater power...